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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 OTTAWA 001024

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/31/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [NATO](#) [CA](#)
SUBJECT: CANADIAN AIR FORCE EMBRACES, RUSHES TRANSFORMATION

REF: A. OTTAWA 649
[B](#). OTTAWA 373
[C](#). OTTAWA 001

Classified By: PolMinCouns Scott Bellard

[1](#). (C//NF) Summary: The International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan is a "transformation driver" that has obliged the Canadian Air Force (CAF) to develop a new Air Expeditionary Wing. The current deployment of about 350 airmen to the Afghan theater will grow to about 700 as the CAF fields six heavy-lift helicopters as well as additional unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). However, the CAF will soon face a shortage of mid-level and senior officers, and is planning on a major recruiting and training surge over the next several years in order to support its growing fleet of fixed and rotary-wing aircraft. The CAF's recent progress, and its plans for the future, appear to be sustainable under the current minority Conservative government, which has made military modernization a key policy priority, but the Liberal Party might reverse course if it were to win office in the next federal election. End summary.

Afghanistan: A "Transformation Driver"

[2](#). (C//NF) Chief of the Air Staff Lieutenant General Angus Watt on July 18 reviewed progress after three years of transformation of the Canadian Air Force (CAF) at an off-the-record gathering of a handful of defense experts in Ottawa. LtGen. Watt characterized the ISAF mission in Afghanistan as a principal "transformation driver" that had prompted the government more generously to fund and expedite the transformation of the entire military into a more capable and nimble expeditionary force. LtGen. Watt commented that one of the CAF's main contributions to the overall transformation effort will be the creation in 2009 of the new Number 2 Air Expeditionary Wing (2 AEW), based in Bagotville, Quebec, which will increase the number of air wings under Canada's sole air division to 14. The AEW will be able to deploy an "air-head" from which it can sustain overseas air operations by 2012, according to LtGen. Watt.

[3](#). (C//NF) In the Afghanistan theater, LtGen. Watt noted, the CAF has maintained a relatively constant deployment of about 350 airmen since 2005, including CAF logistical and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) and interim helicopter support as well as combat engineers overseeing the "traditionally army" road-building piece of the CF's counterinsurgency (COIN) mission in Kandahar. LtGen. Watt predicted that this

figure will grow to about 700 by February 2009, as the CAF fields six newly acquired Chinook helicopters and more capable replacement UAVs in Kandahar.

Demographic Shift

¶4. (C//NF) Turning to human resource challenges, LtGen. Watt expressed concern about the 2012-2016 period, when the CAF will face a "huge shortage" of experienced mid-level and senior airmen. During this period, the 12,500 member CAF will have a ratio of two inexperienced airmen per experienced airman, which is the opposite of the one to two ratio needed to ensure the safety and effectiveness of air operations, he noted. In particular, the CAF will face real challenges due to attrition in the pilot ranks, with the ongoing annual Qto attrition in the pilot ranks, with the ongoing annual intake of 80 new pilot trainees unable to keep up with the estimated 110 retirements and resignations each year. LtGen. Watt added that he hoped to win approval for a surge of up to 140 pilot training slots per year by 2010 to deal with the expected near-term hike in baby-boomer retirements. In the meantime, LtGen. Watt said that he had ordered that re-branded navigators (now Air Combat Systems Officers - ACSOs) fly the next generation of UAVs, instead of pilots.

Transformative Procurements

¶5. (C//NF) LtGen. Watt underscored the progress that the CAF had already made on "transformative" procurements, including four new C-17 strategic lift aircraft during the 2006 - 08

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time-frame; the "excellent aircraft" were now operating at over 85 percent availability. Canada had also procured six CH-47 Chinook helicopters for deployment to Kandahar, Afghanistan, and the multi-year delivery of 17 C-130J aircraft would begin in early 2010. A new C-130 deal will soon permit the CAF to divert its existing fleet of 1960s vintage C-130s to duty as interim domestic search and rescue (SAR) platforms. He expressed confidence that the CAF would release its bid package for the replacement of its fixed-wing SAR aircraft by fall 2009, which would require that the winning bid match or exceed the combined capabilities of both the older C-130 Hercules and the DHC-5 Buffalo. LtGen. Watt noted that electro-optical and machine gun upgrade contracts for the CH-41 Griffon helicopter were already in place. He highlighted that Canada remains a participant in the U.S.-led Joint Strike Fighter project, with Canadian industry winning some valuable contracts. He admitted, however, that the government had not yet decided on a specific replacement for its aging fleet of 80 operational F-18 fighters.

Troubled Procurements

¶6. (C//NF) LtGen. Watt observed that the government also was pressing ahead with some of its more complicated purchases. Canada's 2001 procurement of 15 Augusta-Westland CH-149 Cormorant SAR helicopters had been a major disappointment, he said, as had been the builder's effort to redesign the aircraft's flawed tail structure -- a project that would take an "unacceptable" five years to complete. A separate contract with Sikorsky to deliver 28 CH-148 Cyclone helicopters to replace the remaining 1960s-era CH-124 Sea Kings was behind schedule, he acknowledged, while stressing that elements of it were undergoing re-negotiation to find a workable resolution. For Afghanistan, LtGen. Watt noted that a "more capable leased interim solution" would replace the CAF's depleted fleet of Sperwer UAVs by the end of 2008. Officials have begun preparing for the replacement of the interim UAV with an even more capable long-endurance aircraft. He commented that the CAF had had to extend the life of its fleet of 15 CP-140 Aurora anti-submarine warfare platforms to 2017, but had won approval from the government

to begin the 10-year process of procuring a replacement aircraft.

Comment

17. (C//NF) Military modernization and expansion of the Canadian Forces' capabilities in both manpower and equipment have been a key priority for the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper (ref c), especially under its new "Canada First Defence Strategy" (ref a). Some specific new procurements -- helicopters and UAVs -- were also pre-conditions for the March 2008 House of Commons approval of an extension of the CF's mandate in Kandahar through 2011 (ref b). Despite the government's minority status in the House of Commons, these ambitious plans, including for the CAF, remain sustainable in the current political climate, especially in that they not only advance the mission in Afghanistan but also track with Canada's desire to project its national power to assert its Arctic sovereignty. Should the next federal election -- which could happen as early fall 2008 or as late as October 2009 -- bring the current Official Opposition Liberal Party back into government, however, there is concern in defense circles that the Liberals would trim much of this new procurement in order to divert funds for its higher priority goals for the environment and social welfare.

However, the Conservatives continue to express confidence that they will win the next election and perhaps even form a majority government, and have pledged to continue significantly to invest in Canada's defense capabilities over the coming decade.

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